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Grieving environmental scientists need support

Rates of environmental destruction are greater today than at any previous point in human history (1). This loss of valued species, ecosystems, and landscapes triggers strong grief responses in people with an emotional attachment to nature (2). However, environmental scientists are presented with few opportunities to address this grief professionally.

Environmental scientists tend to respond to degradation of the natural world by ignoring, suppressing, or denying the resulting painful emotions while at work (3). The risks that this entails are profound. Emotional trauma can substantially compromise self-awareness, imagination, and the ability to think coherently (4). As Charles Darwin put it, one “who remains passive when overwhelmed with grief loses [the] best chance of recovering elasticity of mind” (5).

Academic institutes must allow environmental scientists to grieve well and thus emerge stronger from traumatic experiences to discover new insights about our rapidly changing world. Much can be learned from other professions in which distressing circumstances are commonplace, such as healthcare, disaster relief, law enforcement, and the military. In these fields, well-defined organizational structures and active strategies exist for employees to anticipate and manage their emotional distress (6). Effective systems can facilitate healthy grieving processes, enhance psychological recovery, and reduce the risk of long-term mental health impacts, potentially leading to better practice, decision-making, and resilience in future periods of trauma (7–10). Improved psychosocial working environments for scientists might include systematic training of employees, early-intervention debriefing after disturbing events, social support from colleagues and managers, and therapeutic counseling.

The pervasive illusion that scientists must be dispassionate observers is dangerously misguided. Rather, grief and post-traumatic recovery can strengthen resolve and inspire scientific creativity. To understand and find solutions for our increasingly damaged natural ecosystems, environmental scientists must be allowed to cry and be supported as they move forward.

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